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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: OMANI AMBASSADOR DENIES BAN OF WRITERS

REF: MUSCAT 02180

1. (U) The Omani Ambassador to the United States, Mohammed Ali al-Khusaiby, flatly denies that the Omani government has banned any writers (reftel). In a December 8 reply to the New York-based NGO Committee for the Protection of Journalists (CPJ), the Omani Ambassador reaffirmed the Sultanate's commitment to its 1996 constitution (Basic Statute) that guarantees citizens civil, political, social and economic rights, including freedom of speech. The Ambassador stated that the recent decision by Omani news and media outlets to remove articles by Mohammed al-Harthi and Abdullah al-Riyami were independent editorial decisions. He further went on to highlight the "great" achievements of the Sultanate in the last thirty years and asked that the CPJ have "due regard" for the efforts made by the government for all the people of Oman.

2. (U) In the Omani Internet chatroom Al-Sablah, Mohammed al-Harthi posted a rambling and critical response to the Ambassador's letter. In his diatribe, al-Harthi referred to the freedom of press in the Basic Statute as "ink on paper" that has yet to be realized by journalists and writers in Oman. He also blamed Oman's presence on international watchlists for the "shallowness" of the vision of those in charge at the Ministry of Information (MOI). Al-Harthi went on to blast Ambassador al-Khusaiby's attempt to defend the government as indefensible. Moreover, he alluded to articles of the Basic Statute that he believes violate freedom of expression. (Note: Article 29 guarantees freedom of expression "within the limits of the law." Anything that leads to public discord or violates public morale and conduct or opposes the general law is prohibited. End note.) Al-Harthi chastised the Ambassador for not getting his facts straight and being uninformed about the actions of the Ministry of Information. He said that the Ambassador has attempted to "reason the unreasonable and justify the unjustifiable" by saying that the decision to ban writers is up to editors.

3. (SBU) Poet Abdullah al-Riyami told Emboff that he intends to submit his own response to the Ambassador's letter. Both writers have expressed their disbelief at the Omani Ambassador's apparent lack of information regarding the ban and continue to assert the MOI's behind-the-scenes role. The two writers' cause has become daily fodder for Al-Sablah and, in turn, has elevated the writers' profile.
BALTIMORE